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Testimony to the Joint Committee on the Master Plan for Higher Education  
Principles for Effective Coordination – the Case of Community College Transfer  
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## Coordination in Higher Education

### The Need for Better Coordination of Higher Education in California

The primary subject of today's hearing is coordination. Effective coordination has been a consistent weakness of California's higher education system. We have world-class institutions but do not have a world-class system, when "system" is understood as a set of institutions that work collectively and efficiently to meet the needs of students and all Californians. You have heard evidence of this throughout your recent hearings. To state some of the evidence:

- California lags most states in key measures of performance; for example we are:
  - 40<sup>th</sup> in the rate of high school graduates going directly to college
  - 47<sup>th</sup> in the number of degrees/certificates awarded in relation to enrollment
- We are falling behind other states in educating our younger generations: we rank 3<sup>rd</sup> in the portion of people age 65 and over with a college degree but drop steadily until we reach 29<sup>th</sup> place for those ages 25-34.
- We are facing a serious shortage of individuals with college degrees to meet workforce needs – especially in the areas of science and technology.
- We are one of only a few states that have adopted no goals for degree completion, student success, and other important outcomes.

Effective coordination – the ability to harness the resources and energies of institutions toward a common set of goals structured around student success – is what today is separating states that are able to initiate needed reforms from those that are not. Sadly and alarmingly, California is beginning to pay a significant price for lagging behind these other states, as external funders (including the federal government and major foundations) are hesitant to invest in a state seen as resistant to change. Effective coordination, and the leadership to provide it, are necessary to move purposefully toward significant reform.

## Principles of Effective Coordination

Your committee is undoubtedly seeking and receiving myriad suggestions for specific reforms and revisions to state policies. I believe it is most helpful to think in terms of principles that can help you choose among possible actions. In a recent presentation to the League of California Community Colleges Futures Commission, I suggested that to move beyond individual promising, but small, efforts to increase student success, it was necessary to question some core assumptions that have guided policies – not always in the best interest of student success – and to replace them with some core principles. Two of those principles apply well to the topic of coordination:

### ➤ From choice to structure

We have operated under the assumption that choices for students serve them better than structure. Interestingly, the director of the Gates Foundation's higher education program just this week called for more structure and less choice for students to produce what she called the kind of "revolutionary change" that Gates is looking for in college completion.

### ➤ From local autonomy to statewide solutions

Surely, there is always a balance to be struck between local option and statewide consistency in a state's postsecondary system. But it is my belief that we must shift the balance toward statewide solutions to some key problems, as the leading reform states are doing, if we want to best serve students and restore California's competitive position.

## Community College Transfer: Case Study of Coordination

### Problems with Ineffective Coordination

The transfer process in California illustrates the problems that have arisen because of lack of effective coordination, and in particular, because of insufficient structure and the deference to local autonomy over statewide approaches. I briefly describe the problem with transfer as it stands today and then present some approaches being taken in other states to improve transfer success.

First, I want to make it perfectly clear that while transfer is a very important function of our higher education system, we must not forget that community colleges perform other core, high priority functions that do not result in transfer. They award certificates and associate degrees that are also in short supply in our economy and they provide

workforce education to many who do not seek credentials – often because they already have college degrees. Too often policymakers focus exclusively on transfer rates as the measure of community college success. That said, California's higher education system was designed to rely heavily – more than most states – on the transfer mechanism because most students who do seek a bachelor's degree must begin, by virtue of our eligibility requirements, in a community college.

There is much evidence of problems with our transfer system:

- Transfer rates vary by method (there is no "right" way to compute them) but range from 20% to 40%. What this says is that only a small portion of those students who want to transfer do so.
- Most students who do transfer, unwillingly take many more classes than required for a degree. Many of the transfer classes they take in community college end up not counting towards a degree. *This is a waste of students' and taxpayers' money and limits the number of students who can be served.*
- The associate degree was not designed as a transfer degree, so most students who transfer never earn one (only about 20% of transfers do earn an associate degree before transfer). Those who don't complete a bachelor's degree have no credential for years of college study. This is quite different from many states, where students typically earn an associate degree and move on.
- More and more students are transferring to private and proprietary institutions well before they complete a 60 unit transfer curriculum in part because our system is onerous and complex. Little is known about their outcomes but there are reasons to be concerned about high debt and low completion.
- Students pursuing technical education face many barriers to transfer. One is that the substantive courses they take at community college are by definition "lower division" and thus are often not counted toward bachelor's degree requirements when the same content is taught at the upper division at a university.

These problems can be traced directly to the structure (or lack of structure) of our transfer process. A typical transfer curriculum completed at a community college consists of (1) general education courses (GE) and (2) a set of lower division courses required as prerequisites to enter a particular major. But in California:

- *There is no statewide approach to transfer.* Transfer is built around institution-to-institution agreements, which can work well for students who want to stay local and who get admitted to their first choice university and program, but do not work well for others.
- *There is no common general education program* and no assurance that the general education program a student completes at a community college will satisfy the general education requirements of the receiving university and major.
- *There is no consistency across universities in the courses they require students to take to be prepared to enter a major* (see below for just one example that understates the problem by showing just six institutions). This almost guarantees

that students will have to take more than 60 units to be ready to enter a major, because they cannot be certain of acceptance at their first choice institution.

### Lower Division Major Prerequisites for Psychology, Selected Campuses

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•General Psychology</li> <li>•Intro Psychobiology</li> <li>•Elementary Statistics</li> <li>•Human Biology or Human Anatomy</li> <li>•Any psychology elective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Intro. Psych.: Basic Processes</li> <li>•Intro. Psych.: Individual and Social Processes</li> <li>•Methods of Psychology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Statistics</li> <li>•Two psychology electives</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•General Psychology</li> <li>•Research Methods in Psychology</li> <li>•Elementary Statistics</li> <li>•Sociology or Cultural Anthropology</li> <li>•One of several options: (1) Intro. Biology or (2) Essentials of Life on Earth or (3) General Biology <i>and</i> either Human Evolutionary Biology or Human Heredity or Exercise and Fitness: Principles and Practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Intro. to Psychology</li> <li>•Research Methods in Psychology</li> <li>•Intro. to Psychological Statistics</li> <li>•Precalculus</li> <li>•Intro. to Developmental Psychology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Intro. to Psychology</li> <li>•Two natural science or engineering courses, at least one with a lab, field or studio component</li> <li>•Cultural Anthropology or Intro. to Cognitive Science or Intro. to Economics or Intro. to Political Science or Intro. to Public Policy or Intro. to Sociology</li> <li>•Analysis of Psychological Data and Research Methods could be done after transfer</li> </ul>

### Benefits of Effective Coordination

Many states have devised more structured, statewide transfer pathways for students. Common features include (1) a statewide general education program (or the guarantee that all general education courses will transfer to all institutions as a block with no further GE requirements) and (2) structured major pathways. We reviewed eight state approaches in a recent report. Below are some key transfer policy features of one of those states – Florida – where transfer success is relatively high:

- A statewide common course numbering system covering vocational-technical centers, community colleges, universities, and some private institutions.

- No statewide general education pattern but a requirement that all public universities accept a completed general education pattern as a block with no ability to force a student to repeat any courses or take different courses.
- An AA degree that is designed exclusively as a transfer degree. Students who complete the AA are guaranteed admission to a public university with junior status and all units are accepted.
- A common set of prerequisites, for each baccalaureate major, to be taken in community college. Public universities are obligated to recognize these courses as fulfilling admission requirements for transfer students, although some allowances are made for requiring additional prerequisites *after* transfer to meet the unique needs of specific programs.
- A statewide structure for career-oriented certificates and associate degrees (AS and AAS degrees) with all general education requirements for the AS degree deemed transferable.

Florida has been able to accomplish this high degree of standardization of transfer requirements with strong leadership and coordination that have kept student and statewide interests ahead of those of institutions and various groups. Florida's policies reflect a conscious choice of structure and consistency over local autonomy. Certainly there are trade-offs inherent in this choice but the consensus of national education leaders is that the Florida approach is student-centered and efficient.

#### Adhering to Core Principles to Improve Transfer

Numerous, repeated efforts to improve transfer in California have not worked. They have stuck to the traditional paradigm of choice and local autonomy over structure and statewide solutions. They have mostly aimed to (1) strengthen local campus-to-campus transfer agreements and (2) help students and counselors understand this incredible complexity. These initiatives have arguably made things worse – more complex. It is time for a paradigm shift:

***Instead of trying to help students navigate a complex system built on local variation, we should design a system that works for students, for taxpayers, and employers by providing statewide, structured pathways to transfer.***

If California is to fulfill its promise to provide universal access to the baccalaureate degree through the transfer process *and* if it is to reverse the troubling trends of competitive decline, transfer approaches must reflect the principles of structure and statewide consistency. Adhering to these principles would produce:

- A focus on transfer *pathways* rather than just transferable courses.
- A common statewide general education pattern.
- A common set of major prerequisites across all public universities to vastly simplify students' course-taking to prepare for transfer.
- The possibility of associate degrees for transfer to create clear pathways for students to follow and ensure that transfer students earn a college degree.

Transfer is a complex process that involves multiple interests and parties. Today's circumstances call for a revisiting of past thinking in order to strike a better balance between the interests of institutions and their local communities, and the needs of students and the larger California society.

For more information, see:

*Crafting a Student-Centered Transfer Process in California: Lessons from Other States*, by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy (IHELP) at Sacramento State University.

Accessible by download from [www.csus.edu/ihelp](http://www.csus.edu/ihelp) or in hard copy by contacting [ihelp@csus.edu](mailto:ihelp@csus.edu)